

SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN COMMITTEE (SOCHUM)

Topic 3: Handling civil unrest under repressive authoritarian regimes

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1. Definition of Key Terms

Unrest: a disturbed or uneasy state

Social unrest: the general condition of the community in which milling is both frequent and widespread and in which rumour is recurrent is the crucible in which the more highly organized forms of collective behaviour develop.

Authoritarian: of, relating to or in favouring a concentration of power in an elite or power not constitutionally responsible to the people

Authoritarian regime: governments characterized by continuity in leadership, insulation from societal pressures, well-established and integrated interest groups and the power to enforce decisions without the need to respond to the interests of minorities or the disenfranchised

Principle of non-intervention: in international law, the principle of non-intervention includes, but is not limited to, the prohibition of the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state

2. Introduction

As the world has started to have to deal with the inflation in the prices of staple foods and energy there have been worldwide waves of protests. This is shown by the Civil Unrest Index (CUI): of the 198 countries it covers, 101 have seen an increase in the risk of civil unrest since 2016 when the CUI was first released. Moreover, the firm predicts the frequency and severity of protests will increase over the coming months. Therefore, this is going to be a threat to businesses, which are already experiencing a difficult time.

Furthermore, protests have increased with the war in Ukraine and the consequent rise in energy and fuel costs. Additionally, they are usually worsened by the cut in government subsidies. This leads to the fact that anger caused by frustration with inflation evolves into unrest caused by dissent against the government's actions.

Governments often repress protests when they are unable to spend their way out of crises, so repression becomes the main response to anti-government demonstrations. Even at a time of growing frustration with the status quo, in countries with few effective mechanisms for challenging popular discontent such as free media for example, suppression leads to a drop in the population's threshold to take to the streets and protest.

According to Amnesty International, protesters across all regions of the world are facing a potent mix of restrictions with a growing number of laws and other measures limiting the right to protest. These include preventing, forbidding, and criminalising protests, excessive and unnecessary use of force, the unlawful use of law enforcement equipment, unlawful arrests and detentions, the expansion of unlawful mass and targeted surveillance, internet shutdowns and online censorship, and harassment and stigmatization.

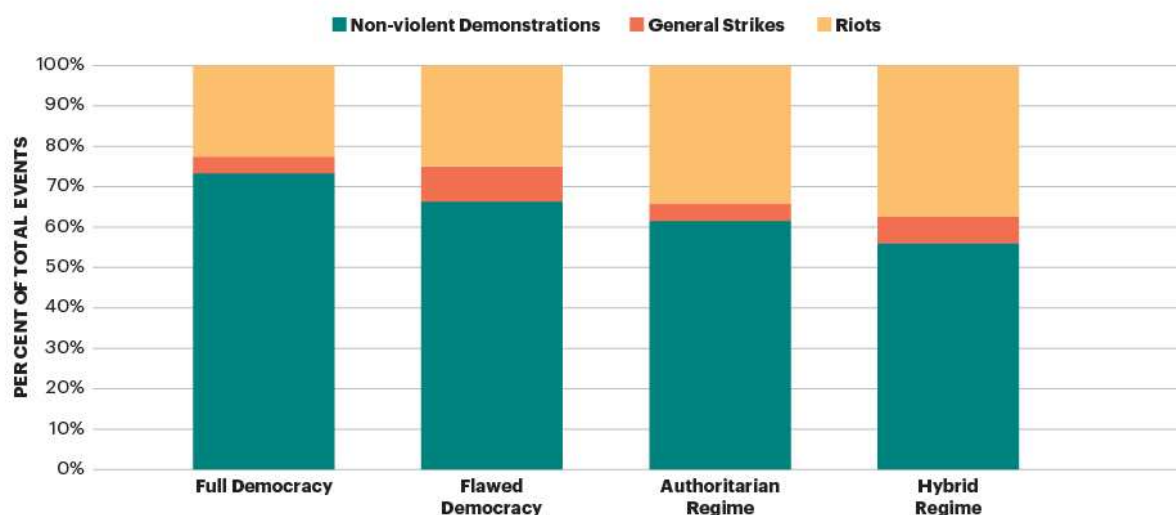
On top of that, people experiencing inequality and discrimination from their government whether based on race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, disability, occupation, social, economic, or migratory status are also more affected by restrictions on their right to protest and they also face harsher restrictions.

Nevertheless, the United Nations declared the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights UDHR (Article 20).

3. Impact of the issue

Moreover, a statistic by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) shows that civil unrests are more likely to get violent and result in riots compared to democracies. Still, the governments that cause the most violent protests are hybrid regimes, in which elections take place without being free and fair, which results in corruption and a weak rule of law.

Distribution of civil unrest by government type, 2011–2018



Source: CNTS, IEP calculations

IEP

Figure 1: civil unrest by government type, (2011-2018)

Another research by the International Monetary Fund asserts that social unrest impedes the growth of a country, as on average major unrest events are followed by a one percentage point reduction in GDP a year and a half after the event. However, in authoritarian regimes the effect on stock market valuations is larger;

stock market returns fall 2 per cent within three days and about 4 per cent in the following month, while in democracies unrests only have a negligible impact on stock market returns.

In contrast to what happens in democratic countries, in authoritarian regimes protests are unlikely to influence policymaking since protests are usually banned or prevented in the first place. When protests do break out, then independent citizens and movements are repressed, and loyalists are often rewarded.

According to the German Green Political Foundation, the repression of social unrest is justified by authoritarian regimes as protection of state sovereignty; protests are silenced and suppressed. If authoritarian regimes repress the activity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), they are instruments of foreign regimes, and they justify their hostility with the principle of non-intervention. However, the International Court of Justice declared in the case of Nicaragua in 1986 that only those activities that involve the use of force against another state, violate the principle of non-intervention. The German Green Political Foundation claims that, because there is no use of force in the activity of international NGOs, these organizations can perform activism with no repercussions. Consequently, NGOs performing activism and protecting human rights, such as the right to protest and assembly, should be helped and supported by other organizations.

An article published in the American Journal of Political Science claims that studies on the impact of repression on oppositions to authoritarian rule are contradictory. Some argue that it reduces popular resistance, while others argue that it creates backlash and more dissent. The authors claim, however, that the impact varies depending on the degree of censorship, that is, if alternatives to the censored media are available, support and protests will grow for the opposition. On the other hand, in case alternative sources of information are not available, repression reduces support for the opposition and increases support for the regime.

4. Major Countries Involved

- **Iran:** In Iran, there have been several protests since the 16th of September 2022, when Mahsa Amini was killed by the Iranian police after being arrested for “not wearing her hijab correctly and for sporting skinny jeans”. Still, the government and police deny the accusations and they claim the death was caused by an “underlying disease”.

As a result, protestors of all ages, ethnicities, and genders are taking to the streets to express their dissent to the regime's restrictions on women's dress and citizen's rights.

These protests have taken many shapes, as many different types of non-violent and peaceful demonstrations have taken place. Nevertheless, there have been violent ones, which mainly had the aim of torching buildings of the security forces.

The government has reacted very violently to the demonstrations from the beginning, especially in areas where ethnic minorities live, such as Kurdistan and Balochistan. More than 18,000 journalists and demonstrators, including sports stars and celebrities, have been arrested, while at least 458 people have been killed. In December the first protestor was executed for corruption on earth, but more executions are expected to take place. Furthermore, troops and heavy weaponry have been used against the demonstrators.

Foreign states such as the US and Israel have been accused of stirring up the protest; however, there is no evidence of that having happened.

- **Afghanistan:** After the 9/11 attacks a US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan and forced the Taliban, which had been ruling the country since 1996, to relocate to southern Afghanistan and the border with Pakistan. 2014 the US-led coalition formally ended its combat mission and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces were put in charge of Afghanistan's security, which was still very fragile due to the Taliban attacks. These attacks resulted in the invasion of the capital on the 15th of August 2021, two weeks before the official US withdrawal. The Taliban then seized control of the whole country. Finally, at the end of August, the last US troops left the country, followed by 120,000 Afghans, who were airlifted and relocated around the world.

Because of the new Taliban regime all rights the Afghan population has had in the last twenty years, especially women, vanished and flogging, amputations and mass executions have been reintroduced.

The freedom of protest and assembly was extremely restricted, too. In fact, the Taliban dispersed many protests across the country using gunfire, electroshock, weapons and tear gas and beat and lashed protestors with whips and cables. Multiple protestors were injured while some were killed, and the government banned all demonstrations and gatherings “until a policy of demonstration is codified”.

Even though the new government claimed it would have maintained freedom of expression, it severely curtailed media freedom. In fact, journalists, especially women or the ones covering protests, were threatened and beaten, so many had to leave the country. House-by-house searches were also conducted in search of journalists working for Western media outlets.

- **Democratic Republic of the Congo:** In the Democratic Republic of the Congo the political system has been paralyzed in recent years by the manipulation of the electoral process by the governing political elites. Consequently, corruption has affected the whole country and citizens cannot exercise their basic civil liberties. Government forces commit violence and human rights abuses, and rebel groups, and militias, such as the M23 group for instance, are active in many areas of the country.

Demonstrators and activists demonstrating their dissent are often held in arbitrary detention for exercising their human rights and even if they are released after a while, their charges are almost never dropped.

Rallies and protests organized by opposition leaders and activists have been banned in Congo and those that went ahead were violently suppressed by government forces. Still, those responsible for illegally banning or suppressing the demonstrations were not held to account.

In recent years the Congolese population has mainly protested against the M23 rebel group, which is supposedly supported by the government of Rwanda. Protestors denounce the international community for its hypocrisy by not condemning Rwanda’s actions, even though its government stays in denial. A United Nations unpublished report points to Rwandan involvement with the M23 group; however, many Western countries do not acknowledge it, and violence continues to spread across the country.

5. Attempts to solve the issue

The European Union slapped sanctions on Iran, which targeted 29 individuals responsible for Amini’s death. Iran is one of the most sanctioned countries in the world as not only the export of many goods has been blocked, but the whole country is out of the world banking system, too.

Supporters of these sanctions claim they put the governing elite under pressure and force them to change their behaviour. On the other hand, some argue that sanctioning essential goods is counterproductive as it allows to weaponize food and medicine and therefore makes the population dependent on the state. For this reason, supporters of the protests demand the same action against Iran that was shown to Russia for the war in Ukraine from the West.

After three women, who were arrested together with their families for organizing women’s rights protests in Afghanistan, shared their brutal experience in detention, Human Rights Watch harshly criticized the Taliban for not respecting many human rights. That’s why it demands that the government immediately releases everyone detained for exercising their right to free speech and peaceful protest. Moreover, before being detained the protestors should have immediate access to counsel and be guaranteed due process. Prisoners should be held following the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and finally, those torturing them should be impartially investigated and persecuted.

Additionally, Human Rights Watch is asking other states to increase refugee resettlement places for Afghans, focusing on sheltering women’s rights defenders, who are at particularly high risk as a result of ongoing activism. Finally, it demands the UN advance efforts to provide accountability for the human rights violations taking place in Afghanistan by establishing an UN-mandated accountability mechanism to collect and investigate evidence of abuses, for instance.

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